singing histories

London
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Foreword
Backwards, rewind, play

Londoners have always had a thirst for singing – turning every newsworthy encounter into melodic form. Prior to the days of tabloid newspapers, every battle, murder, hanging, price increase or celebrity fall from grace was put into verse and then type set, illustrated and printed on a broadside press to be sung around the country.

When the broadside trade took off, in the mid 1700s, Seven Dials in Covent Garden became known for its many print houses – each one turning out page upon page of song sheets. These were sold on to an enthusiastic public in their millions and then plastered onto the walls of inns, cow sheds, workhouses and workshops to be recited and absorbed into the public conscience. Distributed via broadside sellers, pedlars and minstrels, these ‘catchpennys’ – as they were also known - used song as a common language: music did not just exist in the ears of London but in its mind and memory too.

Music has always been a feature of everyday society in London, from the singing taverns of the late 17th century to the street traders who advertised their wares by singing in the markets and on street corners. You can still hear market traders today calling out ‘a pound a punnet’ and other slogans – a form of singing advert that travels as far as the voice can carry.

Taverns grew into larger halls where feasting, drinking and smoking accompanied an increasingly diverse and skilful range of entertainers. By the 1850s these ‘music halls’ had developed far beyond just glorified inns. One of the best known of these – the Eagle’s Tavern on Shepherdess Walk in Hackney – became immortalised in the popular rhyme Pop goes the Weasel.

Up and down the City Road
In and out the Eagle
That’s the way the money goes
Pop! goes the weasel

London continues to be a city of song, capturing the stories and everyday existences of its people. The songs of Londoners have spread down the centuries and throughout the country, passing from generation to generation, community to community – shifting, evolving and defining the emotional landscape of London as it was then and as it still is now.

This collection offers the stories behind some of these songs. We hope you enjoy discovering their hidden meanings and singing your way through London’s history.

Sam Lee London Links Officer
English Folk Dance and Song Society
wwwefdss.org
The river

The river Thames is England’s largest river and the second longest in the UK. Rising at Thames Head in Gloucestershire, it eventually exits at the Thames Estuary into the North Sea. London has gained its strength and infrastructure from its position by the Thames and all along the river’s banks you can see the architectural relics of industries supported by the river – often directly overlaid by new trades and cultures, as warehouses and power stations are turned into luxury flats, restaurants and galleries.

Take the OXO Tower for instance: constructed as the Post Office’s own power station in the 1890s, it then passed into the hands of the ‘Liebig Extract of Meat Company’ (who made Oxo stock cubes) before being converted to restaurants and galleries at the end of the twentieth century. Just take a stroll along the southern banks underneath the tower and glance around the alluvial sediments: at low tide you can pick out the bones and teeth of ancient cows and horses slung into the tide. How did they get there? Were these rendered down in pre-industrial glue making factories or made into soup stock for national consumption?
A wherry is a light rowboat that is used for racing or for transporting goods and passengers in inland waters and harbours. In 1555 an Act of Parliament set up the Company of Watermen and Lightermen to control the watermen on the River Thames who were responsible for the transportation of goods and passengers. Today Watermen and Lightermen are still licensed by the Company, with Freemen of the Company eligible to participate in the Doggett’s Coat and Badge Race. Winners of the race have the honour of wearing the Scarlet coat, breeches and silver arm badge based on the original costume of 18th Century Watermen.

This romantic tale was sung by Bob Roberts and was probably picked up from either his mother, from whom he learned many of his songs, or other bargemen he worked alongside. Born in the village of Hampreston in Dorset in 1907 he went to sea at 15 and worked for many years on sea-going sailing barges, regularly carrying cargo back and forth along the Thames. He skippered the last sailing barge in commercial use – The Cambria – which picked up cement from Everard’s Wharf at Greenhithe.

Bob Roberts can be heard on the Topic LP Songs from the Sailing Barges. Bob’s boat The Cambria is now being restored and is moored in Faversham in Kent. Bob Roberts can be heard on the Topic LP Songs from the Sailing Barges. Topic 12TS 361

Till there came a young goose girl from Stratford St Mary
And she wanted taking to Farringdon Fair
But she had not the hapney to pay for her wherry
And stood on the steps in a pretty despair
But she sang so sweet she sang so merry

He put her and all of her geese in his wherry
And her pretty face was a fair farer ferry
And rode her across to Farringdon Fare
They were married next May time in Stratford St Mary
And now they have waterman one, two, three, four

The couples all jostle to hire their wherry
And everyone goes by the Blackfriars ferry
While he stays at home with a love of his own
London Steamer

‘Arranged – Sally Davies’

Sop.

O the London steamer sailed a-way When all on

Alto

O the London steamer sailed a-way When all on

Tenor

O the London steamer sailed a-way When all on

S.

board and each heart was gay When all on

A.

board and each heart was gay When all on

T.

board and each heart was gay When all on

board and each heart was gay Oh the London steamer sailed a-way.

aligned right

All right we were through the Channel Downs We arrived safely at Plymouth Sound And we not far did go When the Tempest howled and the wind did blow ‘Twas in the Bay of Biscay, the sea run high Danger and death was approaching nigh Nor could their sufferings none reveal What these poor souls on board did feel

Captain Martin around did look With a terrible crash our t’gallent mast broke We worked like Britons with all our gallant might To save that vessel on that dreadful night Three hundred and seventy dear souls afloat In the height of the gale nineteen took a boat Out of the whole but nineteen were saved Three hundred and fifty met a watery grave
By the start of the 19th century, Britain was the world’s leading industrial power and dominated international commerce. London – the main entry point to Britain – became the world’s largest port, adapting to accommodate changing technologies such as steamships. By 1886 there were seven enclosed dock systems within the Port of London. The riverside communities of East London also saw new factories, power stations and shipyards spread along the banks of the Thames.

*The London Steamer* comes from the songs of Sam Larner, who was born in 1878 in Winterton, Norfolk. Signed up as a ‘Peggy’ or cabin boy at only 12 years old, Sam was involved in herring fishing until his forced retirement in 1933. Towards the end of the century, traditional herring fishing techniques were revolutionised and in 1899 Sam got a job on *The Lottie* – one of the ‘newfangled’ steam drifters. He has said that the work on board these vessels was ‘like heaven’ in comparison to the old boats; that steam drifters were ‘ideal for the job’, but not, as the song declares, without their dangers.

This song can be heard on Topic LP *A Garland for Sam*. Topic 12T 244

Notorious criminals have always excited the imaginations of Londoners, from the legendary highwayman Dick Turpin to Jack the Ripper. Sombre figures of retribution – such as reformed thieves who became hangmen – also loomed large. Now layered under tarmac, rerouted, paved over or simply built upon, London’s roads are speckled with junctions and pathways at which mystery and misfortune have overcome many an unlucky traveller.
Wild and Wicked Youth

Robert Hurr’s *Wild and Wicked Youth* is another example of the popular ‘goodnight ballads’. It mentions ‘Fielding’s Gang’, which was London’s first police force (also known as the Bow Street Runners). Set up in 1749 by the author Henry Fielding, who was also a magistrate at Bow Magistrates Court, it was London’s first formalised law enforcement agency. It was financed centrally through the courts, unlike the more common ‘thief-takers’, who solved petty crime on a freelance basis.

Sung to Vaughan Williams on the 24th November 1910 in Southwold, Suffolk, this song can be found in *Blyth Valley Voices, Folk Songs*, collected by R V Williams and published by EATMT (2003).

For at seventeen I took a wife
I loved her dearly as I loved my life
For to maintain her both fine and gay
I took up a robbing on the King’s Highway
I robbed Lord Dukes I do declare
And lovely Nancy with the golden hair
We shuttered the shutters, bid them goodnight
And carried the gold to our heart’s delight
Through Covent Garden I took my way
With my pretty blowen to see the play
Till Fielding’s gang did me pursue

Taken I was by the cursed crew
But when I am dead and carried to my grave
A pleasant funeral let me have
Six highwaymen to carry me
Give them broadswords and sweet liberty
Six blooming girls to bear up my pall
Give them white gloves and pink ribbons all
When I’m dead they may tell the truth
There goes a wild and a wicked youth

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Sung to Vaughan Williams on the 24th November 1910 in Southwold, Suffolk, this song can be found in *Blyth Valley Voices, Folk Songs*, collected by R V Williams and published by EATMT (2003).
I missed my family and my friends and so
For company to the pub I go
I started going most every night
Till whiskey’s company was my one delight

A gypsy warned me when I was a lad
One day the drink it will drive you mad
I laughed at her ’til the tears ran down

But whiskey laughs the longest in the pubs round Camden Town
So come all you people sitting safe at home
Who for employment never had to roam
You could wake tomorrow and your world’s gone wrong
You’ll find yourself joining in whiskey’s old sweet song

This song deals openly with the consoling company of drink that those taking new life and employment in London often find themselves keeping. Written as an anthem for Camden’s Irish community, the sentiment crosses cultures and can be appreciated by any immigrant community starting a new life away from their homeland.

Irish citizens have lived in London for centuries. By 1851 there were more Irish-born people living in London than in any other city in mainland Britain. The 1851 census calculated that 105,548 Irish people lived in London – 4.6% of the total population. Today the London Borough of Brent is home to one of the largest Irish communities in the world outside of Ireland and Kilburn has affectionately been renamed County Kilburn to reflect this.

Wild, Wild Whiskey can be heard on Bob Davenport’s CD, The Common Stone. TSCD552
Love

Paris in the spring? How about London in the summer, when the city throbs like a cicada and friends and lovers lounge around cafés, piazzas and parks? The native Londoner is not renowned for being an outwardly romantic creature but has been known to break with tradition and whirl a lover off to the Southbank or Hampstead Heath. Hand in hand with love, however, comes loss and London has its fair share of spurned lover’s retreats, hideaways and escapes. These songs are a testament to the darker side of love in London, as elsewhere.

The London skyline was first illuminated on 28th January 1807 as Pall Mall became the first street in the world to be lit by gas light. By 1823 there were 40,000 street lamps lighting 213 streets in London. In London Lights their melancholic glow illuminates an age-old story, as an unmarried, cast-out mother looks into the glare – exclaiming at their beauty despite her hardship and embittered circumstances.

London Lights was sung by Lizzie Higgins, a Scottish Traveller from Aberdeen and is probably a music hall piece that somehow found its way up to North East Scotland. It is a version of a song known often as the Blue Eyed Lover, which was popular amongst Gypsy communities (two verses from the Shropshire Gypsy singer May Bradley have been included in this text).

Lizzie Higgins can be heard on the Musical Traditions CD In Memory Of. MTCD 337-8

London Lights

See how that young man learned to love me
And he taught me do the same
But now he’s went away and left me
And on my brow there’s written shame.

Chorus
See how those London Lights are gleaming
Through the frost and falling snow
Sleep on, sleep on my blue-eyed treasure
Your mother’s got nowhere to go

It was those two blue eyes that ‘ticed me
‘Ticed me from my happy home
Although he ran away and left me
He is the father of my child

Chorus
See how my sisters they despise me
And my brothers do the same
For father says he will not own me
And my mother hangs her head in shame.

Chorus
Although my clothes are going ragged
Still they’ll keep my baby warm
Sleep on, sleep on my blue eyed treasure
Your father won’t be very long

Chorus
Stanley and Dora

Stanley and Dora were lovers
They met on the Tottenham Court Road
Whooping it up at the Palais
Where the ice cream fountains flow
He was her man
A Lonnie Donegan fan.

Now Dora was swiftly promoted
To the circle she rose in a dream
When who should she see but
young Stanley
With the chick what sold ice cream
He chucked her up
For a Walls’ Ice cup

But justice came soon to poor Dora
For Stan and his Walls’ ice cream
They both got killed in the rush
for the exit
When they played God Save our Queen
God save our Stan
The only one what can

The skiffle boom of the late 1950s, pioneered by the late Lonnie Donegan, brought the fresh new sound of American Rhythm and Blues to the UK. Instantly London became full of clubs and music nights emulating the style and energy of this fashionable culture. Frankie and Johnny became a popular hit of this genre, helping lay the seeds for the Rock and Roll revolution.

Somewhere during this musical fervour the tune to a popular song from 1904 – Frankie and Johnny – was used for a new set of lyrics that captured a shift in attitude in England. Remember that this song was set during a period when people were beginning to call into question the acceptability of singing God Save our Queen before or after every cinema showing, theatre production and music concert. The times they were a changin’!

The words can possibly be attributed to Ron Gould.
Ditties and rhymes

Boys and girls come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day.
Leave your supper and leave your sleep
And join your playfellows in the street.

Regardless of time or place – from an Elizabethan street scene to a bombed out Second World War ruin – children have always been the true masters of the streets. They embellish, furnish and theatricalise their turf through games, dances, stories and songs. In the process they develop their own unique folklore. This oral lore, like all folklore, is constantly evolving and being eroded, guided by the same laws of adaptation, repair and survival that govern our natural world.

‘It sometimes happens that a rhyme or song which seems to be recent has in fact been marching with history for centuries changing during the years little more than its uniform before appearing on each new battlefield.’

Opie: Lore and Language of School Children.

Rhymes and ditties turn out to be some of the most recognised and frequently sung music in the world and we have to ask: does this reflect the strength of the song, the strength of the collective memory of the communities that sing them or the importance and purpose they serve as social play-dough?

How Many Miles to London Town

This school ground rhyme and game is more often named How many miles to Babylon (or Bethlehem). Its transfer to London suggests the timeless association of the city with other historically significant imperial centres. In the late 1980’s graffiti around the Hackney Marshes proclaimed the insightful word ‘Babylondon’, echoing back to the twelfth century when a section of London Wall was named ‘Babylone’.

As Peter Ackroyd writes of the song: “Although the derivation and meaning of this verse is unclear, the image of the city seems to assert itself as a potent beckoning force; in a variant of this song ‘Bethlehem’ takes the place of Babylon, and may point to the madhouse in Moorfields rather than any more remote destination.”
London Bridge is Broken Down

Build it up with wood and clay
Wood and clay, wood and clay
Build it up with wood and clay
My fair lady

Wood and clay will wash away
Wash away, wash away
Wood and clay will wash away
My fair lady

Build it up with bricks and mortar…
Bricks and mortar will not stay…
Build it up with iron and steel…
Iron and steel will bend and bow…
Build it up with steel and gold…
Silver and gold will be stolen away…
Set a man to watch all night…
Suppose the man should fall asleep…
Give him a pipe to smoke all night…

The mysterious symbolism of this song probably originates from several stories about the destruction of London Bridge.
At the same time, it also refers to the symbolic implication of bridging and thus taming a river.

The current London Bridge, built in 1973, is located near the site of the first known crossing over the Thames – a Roman bridge which dates back around 2,000 years. However, in 60AD the bridge and trading settlement were destroyed by Queen Boadicea. King Olaf of Norway repeated this destruction in 1014, when he tied his boats to the timber piles in order to dislodge them and collapse the whole structure into the river.

In less precarious times, 138 houses were famously built on the bridge in 1757, including a public latrine (‘vertically plumbed’ direct into the river). When this structure was finally demolished it was for the unromantically utilitarian purpose of road widening.
The position of London by the Thames estuary means that it has been the main centre of trade for Britain, from Roman times to the present day. During the 18th century, Britain rose to a dominant position among European trading empires and ships from all over the world brought a wide range of goods to London, before filling up with local produce to export abroad. As a result, people came to London from all over the country to benefit from this huge expansion in trade.

Since 1133, Bartholomew Fair, based in Smithfield, held pride of place for Londoners as the most prolific and popular market and trade fair of the year. Starting on St Bartholomew’s Day on 24th August, it ran for anything from three days to three weeks. It was finally stopped in 1855 through local opposition and steady suppression by the London Authorities.

It was both larger and older than the Barnet, Southwark, Greenwich and Fairlop fairs – London’s significant rivals. Initially a trade fair, it became popular for its theatrics and entertainment (like a latter day Glastonbury Festival), which made it the most anticipated highlight of the summer. Steve Roud’s book, ‘The Folklore of London,’ describes it thus: ‘Particularly known for its large booths, presenting everything from Shakespeare to the latest comedies and farces; in addition there were puppet shows, dancing booths, menageries, wild beast shows, tightrope walkers, freak shows, gingerbread stalls and of course every kind of food and drink imaginable, but particularly roast pork!’.
This song comes from the singing of Stanley Robertson, a Scottish Traveller living in Aberdeen. He was taught this song as a child along with many other ditties and ballads around the camp fire. *A Maiden Came* is a song he learnt from his Aunt Jeannie, though how she learned it is anybody’s guess. It remarks upon two separate trades which have long been competing for the title of ‘oldest trade in the world’: a case of, ‘which was sold first, the chicken or the egg?’

The pox here most likely refers to syphilis, a sexually transmitted disease often cited as being brought over in 1490 from the Americas. The incurable affliction was treated by many lethal methods, with mercury being the most popular. This treatment gave rise to the saying: ‘A night in the arms of Venus leads to a lifetime on Mercury’.

**A Maiden Came from London Town**

**Chorus:**

A maiden came from London town some apples and pears to sell: An adventurer met her on her way what’s this I’ve got to tell? With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye. With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye.

Apples and pears kind sir she says come taste them if you please And if there’s anything else you’d like please ask them at your ease With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye

What would you take my fair pretty maid to lye a night with me And I will give you all I can I’ll be good company With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye

They both went back to London town and there the room they went And there he hired this fair pretty maid for but he would not pay his rent With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye

Serves you right you silly wee lass for opening up your door Not a penny I shall give for I am very poor With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye

Well I hope that you enjoyed yourself for playing up my locks I’ll have the last laugh cause I’ve left you with the pox With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye With me tarren-en tonight te-nay sing righ fe lar re lye
Hopping Down in Kent

Now when I went a hopping, hopping down in Kent
I saw old mother Reilly a sweeping out her tent
With me Tee-i-o, tee-i-o, Tee-I ee-I oh

Every Monday morning just at 6 o'clock
You'll hear the old hoppers calling
get up and boil your pot

Now Sunday is our washing day
don't we wash it clean
We boil it in our hopping pots and hang it on the green

Now do you want any money?
Yes sir if you please

To buy a hock of bacon and a pound of mouldy cheese
Now here comes our old measurer with his long nose and chin
With his 10 gallon basket and don't he pop 'em in

When our old pole puller, he does come around
He says come on you dirty old hop pickers, pick em up all off the ground
Now hopping is all over, all the money's spent
And don't I wished I never went a hopping down in Kent

Hops are flowers that are picked and added to beer during the brewing process to give it its bitter flavour. It is thought they were brought to England in approximately 1520 and the first hop garden was established near Canterbury. The hops begin to flower in July, growing petals and leaving a cone in which the yellow lupulin glands that are responsible for the bitter taste are formed. By September the cones are ready to be picked.

Hopping was big work for the families of South East London as well as Gypsies, who dominated the workforce (including the contributor of this song, Louie Fuller). Having spent the summer travelling the country picking fruit and vegetables – such as cherries, strawberries, beans and peas – the pickers would gather in September to collect Kent’s most famous crop. To the working-class communities of South East London, hop picking was considered a working holiday and whole families would travel into the ‘garden of England’.
Mitcham Common, according to the census of 1881, was home to some 230 Romany Travellers and was a key place for the cultivation of herbs, particularly lavender. Bunches of lavender would be bound up by Gypsy hawkers and sold on London’s streets. To advertise their wares, the sellers would sing a lavender cry to draw attention. This exotic melody would vary from hawker to hawker but was always derived from a common melody.

Janet Penfold and her mother Florrie were probably the last lavender sellers in London to sing this cry when they were recorded in 1958. They would get up at 4 o’clock in the morning to walk from Battersea to Mitcham, pick the flowers “while the dew was still on” and return to sell them throughout Chelsea, Pimlico and Sloane Square.

“It was my grandmother learned us. They done it all their life and it was always done from one generation to the next. It’s because they like the smell of it and the people like to hear the London cry” (Florrie Penfold aged 70 years).
War and farewell

London is the control centre of Britain’s military power, but has also witnessed its fair share of uprisings by its citizens. From the ‘Battle of Trafalgar’ poll tax riots of 1990 to 1936 Cable Street riots in the East End, certain areas of the city are inextricably linked to the brutal clashes between London’s citizens and its law enforcement agencies.

On 2nd June 1780 London experienced a great uprising known as the Gordon Riots aimed against the Papist Act of 1778, ‘Relieving his Majesty’s subjects of the Catholic religion from certain penalties and disabilities imposed upon them during the reign of William III.’ This act was implemented as a way of encouraging Catholics (previously excluded from the British Army for having to take the Protestant religious oath) to join the armed forces and fight in the American War of Independence. The ensuing uprising saw martial law declared across the City as a crowd of over 40,000 laid siege to important landmarks, such as Newgate prison and the Bank of England, as well as churches and homes.

The army also employed more devious ways of recruiting men (and occasionally women) and the press gang phenomenon gripped the public imagination like a grown man’s Bogyman. Songs arose from these reckless gangs gleaning the city taverns and occasionally civic buildings for young blood to man the war ships.

Basket and Chairs

For I say, ladies don’t delay
Come and buy your chairs
and baskets today
Buy ‘em of the maker
For we are sons of the jolly
basket makers

We mean to sell ‘em all and
make no more
Come and buy your parlour
rugs today
Buy ‘em of the maker

This song, similar to the _Lavender Cry_, was sung as a way of attracting customers to buy the wares on offer. Travelling communities were often traders and came to buy and sell at fairs around London. Economic changes in the 20th Century, as well as technological leaps in industrial manufacturing, made some of the traditional trades obsolete.

This song was sung to Cecil Sharp on 16 May 1908 by Agnes Collins, a Gypsy van seller, in Adelaide Road, Hampstead. The melody for the last verse was never notated and is therefore left to you to improvise, either using the theme or not. The varied phrase lengths offer a multitude of interpretations.
The Press Gang

Come brother shipmates tell me true
What kind of a treatment they give you
That I may know before I go
On board of a Man o’ War Boys

When I got there to my surprise
All that they told me was shocking lies
There was a row and a jolly old row
On board of a Man o’ War Boys

The first thing they done they took me in hand
They lashed me with a tar of a strand
They fl ogged me till I could not stand
On board of a Man o’ War Boys

Now I was married and my wife’s name was Grace
T’was she that led me to shocking disgrace
T’was she that caused me to go away
On board of a Man o’ War Boys

When next I get my foot on shore
To see those London girls once more
I’ll never go to sea no more
On board of a Man o’ War Boys

The forcible enlistment of soldiers through the ‘press gangs’ was once quite common and during the 18th century, seventy percent of soldiers were ‘pressed’ into the King’s fleet by this method. Teams called ‘Lobsters’ roamed the streets for hapless victims and kidnapped able-bodied men. Understandably, this caused widespread discontent throughout ‘press-scoured’ districts and many songs have grown out of the pain of lovers being separated. However, it was not unknown for protective parents to pay off the ‘Yellow Admirals’, leaders of these gangs, to ‘remove’ unwanted lovers. From the singing of Ewan MacColl: Antiquities SMDCD149
From the singing of Ewan MacColl

They sent me to my quarters, they sent me to my bed
And lying by a soldier’s side I did not feel afraid
For in taking off my red coat I often times did smile
To think myself a drummer but a maiden all the while…

They sent me up to London for there to mind the Tower
And there I might have been until this very day and hour
Till a young girl fell in love with me, I told her I was a maid
She went unto my officer, my secret she betrayed…

My officer sent to see me to see if it was true
I smiled, oh I smiled, I told him it was true
He looked upon me kindly and these are the words he said
It’s a pity we should lose you such a drummer as you made…

Oh fare you well, dear officer,
you have been kind to me
And fare you well, dear Colonel, will you please remember me
If the war it should break out again and you are short of men
I’ll put on my hat and feathers and I’ll beat the drum again…

Female soldiers and sailors were rare but celebrated figures and fought bravely while trying to keep their identity disguised. Hannah Snell (1723–1792) was one of the most famous of these valiant women. She fought in battles across the world and after finishing her service – and subsequently revealing her gender to her shipmates – she was granted a military pension. Married three times, she went on to open a pub in Wapping called the Female Warrior.

This song was recorded by Ken Stubbs from the singing of Elizabeth Smith in Surrey, 1966. It is included in the book Life of a Man (1970).
City songs

Not only have Londoners written songs about mischief and illegal behaviour but they have used music itself as a means to regulate misdemeanours and petty crime and admonish those who step out of line with the community’s code of conduct. The tradition of ‘rough music’ is an example of this – a practical way of keeping law and order as exemplified in the following account about the hat-dyeing industry in Southwark around 1770: ‘They took one of their brother journeymen into custody, whom they charged with working over hours without anymore pay, and for taking under price. They obliged him to mount an ass [backwards usually] and ride through all the parts of the Borough where hatters were employed… a label was carried on a pole before him, denoting his offence; and a number of boys attended with shovels, playing the rough music; at all shops they came to in their business, they obliged the men to strike, in order to have their wages raised.’

More ferocious forms of ‘Rough music’ were employed to drive out unwelcome neighbours. This could last legally for up to three nights, with pots, pans, shovels and dustbin lids being bashed by a mob outside the victim’s home. It was generally inflicted on those who crossed the mark of reasonable domestic behaviour, including widows and widowers who married too soon, adulterers and those breaching the parameters of sexual morality.

What We Do if We Have Got no Money

From the singing of Mary Delaney, still said to be alive today and living in London. Mary is an Irish Traveller, blind and a singer of terrific vigour. Her repertoire includes many old songs learnt from her family as well as ditties, such as this one, which have no known origin but were probably invented around the fires and on the road. This song was recorded from Mary while she was living in a caravan underneath the Hammersmith flyover. The song was recorded by Jim Carroll and Pat Mackenzie and can be heard on the Musical Traditions CD Puck to Appleby Fair. 325-6.
Up to the Rigs of London Town

She took me to some house of fame
And boldly did she enter in
Loudly for supper she did call
Thinking I was going to pay for it all

The supper o’er, the table cleared
She called me her jewel and then her dear
The waiter brought white wine and red
While the chambermaid prepared the bed

Between the hours of one and two
She asked me if to bed I’d go
Immediately I did consent
And along with this pretty girl I went

Her cheeks was white and her lips was red
And I kissed her as she laid in bed
But soon as I found she was fast asleep
Out of the bed then I did creep

I searched her pockets and there
I found
A silver snuffbox and ten pound
A gold watch and a diamond ring
I took the lot and locked me lady in

Now all young men wherever you be
If you meet a pretty girl you use her free
You use her free but don’t get plied
But remember me when I was up Cheapside

Before the London Blitz of 1940, Cheapside was one of the main markets of London. It traded much of the food produce that is recorded in the local street names – Milk Street, Poultry, Bread Street and Honey Lane. Cheapside is a common English street name meaning market-place, from the Old English word ‘ceapan’, meaning ‘to buy’.

Charles Dickens, Jr. wrote in his 1879 book Dickens’s Dictionary of London: ‘Cheapside remains now what it was five centuries ago, the greatest thoroughfare in the City of London. Other localities have had their day, have risen, become fashionable, and have sunk into obscurity and neglect, but Cheapside has maintained its place, and may boast of being the busiest thoroughfare in the world, with the sole exception perhaps of London-bridge.’

This misogynistic tale of deceit and wanton theft was very popular amongst country singers but not often noted down by Victorian and Edwardian collectors (who probably deemed it far too vulgar). Luckily this version was recorded from the Dorset singer Charlie Wills, born in 1875. He was taped in 1952 by Peter Kennedy singing this song with magnificent glee and spirit. It can be heard on the CD Voice Of The People: First I’m Going To Sing. TSCD 657
Maybe it’s Because I’m a Londoner

Gregg Hubert is the forgotten composer of this song. He wrote the classic in 1944 – after watching German doodlebugs flying over his home – and described it as ‘a love song to my city’. Like the best songs, it entered quickly into the communal repertoire and is often thought of as an older song than it actually is.
Further materials relating to these songs can be found in the following libraries and archives:

Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House – wwwefdssorg/libraryhtm
National Sound Archive at The British Library – wwwbluknsa

Further EF DSS resources on folk song can be found at:
wwwfunwithfolkcom
wwwteachingfolksongcom
httplibraryefdssorgarchives

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